

Developing Cultural Understanding

By Tiina Matikainen and Carolyn B. Duffy

Being aware of the differences that exist between cultures and knowing how to act when we are faced with puzzling cross-cultural situations are important skills for harmonious intercultural relations.

Cross-cultural research shows that we can examine all cultures by using a basic taxonomy of cultural behaviors which allows us to see the differences and similarities among cultures.

This article provides students with knowledge and activities to enhance their awareness of cultural patterns among the different cultures of the world.

In the following lesson students will learn about basic attitudes different cultures have toward three cultural value dimensions: the role of the individual in a society, power distance, and time orientation. Students will then apply this knowledge in activities that require them to decide how to act in cross-cultural situations based on the information they have learned about that cultures values.

The *culture** in which each of us lives influences and shapes our feelings, attitudes, and responses to our experiences and interactions with others. Because of our culture, each of us has knowledge, beliefs, values, views, and behaviors that we share with others who have the same cultural heritage. These past experiences, handed down from generation to generation, influence our values of what is attractive and what is ugly, what is acceptable behavior and what is not, and what is right and what is wrong. Our culture also teaches us how to interpret the world. From our culture we learn such things as how close to stand to strangers, when to speak and when to be silent, how to greet friends and strangers, and how to display anger appropriately. Because each culture has a unique way of approaching these situations, we find great diversity in cultural behaviors throughout the world.

Learning about cultural diversity provides students with knowledge and skills for more effective communication in intercultural situations. Samovar and Porter (1999) suggest that the first step in being a good intercultural communicator is to know your own culture and to know yourself-in other words, to reflect thoughtfully on how you perceive things and how you act on those perceptions. Second, the more we know about the different cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes of our global neighbors, the better prepared we will be to recognize and to understand the differences in their cultural behaviors. The knowledge of cultural differences and self-knowledge of how we usually respond to those differences can make us aware of hidden prejudices and stereotypes which are barriers to tolerance, understanding, and good communication.

The cultural behaviors of people from the same country can be referred to collectively as cultural patterns, which are clusters of interrelated cultural orientations. The common cultural patterns that apply to the entire country represent the dominant culture in a heterogeneous society. It is important to remember that even within a homogeneous society, the dominant cultural pattern

does not necessarily apply to everyone living in that society. Our perception of the world does not develop only because of our culture; many other factors contribute to the development of our individual views. When we refer to a dominant cultural pattern we are referring to the patterns that foreigners are most likely to encounter. We also need to remember that culture is dynamic and as the needs and values of individuals change, the cultural patterns will also change.

One example of such a change is the status of women in United States culture. After World War II, women began to work outside the home and started to share the previously male role of family provider. At the same time, family roles shifted to accommodate the working wife and mother, and men had to assume more responsibility for maintaining the home, like helping to cook, clean, and care for children.

Value dimensions are a group of interrelated values that have a significant impact on all cultures. Hofstede (1980) has developed a taxonomy (a classification system) that identifies value dimensions, that are influenced and modified by culture like individualism-collectivism and power distance. In individualistic cultures, each individual is the most important part of the social structure, and each individual is valued for his/her unique persona. People are concerned with their own personal goals and may not possess great loyalty to groups.

In collective cultures, on the other hand, individuals are very loyal to all the groups they are part of, including the work place, the family, and the community. Within collectivism, people are concerned with the group's ideas and goals, and act in ways that fulfill the group's purposes rather than the individual's. Samovar et. al., (1997) note that while individualism and collectivism can be treated as separate dominant cultural patterns, and that it is helpful to do so, all people and cultures have both individual and collective dispositions.

According to Hofstede's classification system, a second value dimension that varies with different cultures is power distance. Some cultures have high-power distances and others have low-power distances. High-power-distance cultures believe that authority is essential in social structure, and strict social classes and hierarchy exist in these countries. In low-power cultures people believe in equality and the people with power may interact with the people without power on an equal level.

Kluckhohn (1961) offers a third value dimension, a culture's orientation to time. In our world, we have cultures that are either past-oriented, present-oriented, or future-oriented. Each of these different attitudes describes the degree to which the culture values the past, the present, or the future. Cultures place emphasis on the events that have happened or will happen during the period that they view as important.

* *Italicized words in Appendix A.*

Classroom Applications

The following lesson introduces students to some basic cultural values including individualism, collectivism, power distance, and time orientation and discusses how knowledge about these different cultural values can enhance our understanding of cultural diversity.

Preliminary Lesson Planning

For the lesson, make copies of the following materials for all students:

- Handouts of questions used in the warm-up activity. (If you prefer, you can also write these questions on the blackboard or on a poster board prior to the lesson.)
- Handouts of the reading for Activity #1 (Appendix B) and the Comprehension chart for the reading activity in Activity #1 (Appendix C).
- Cultural Advisor cards on which the letters for Activity #2 (Appendix D) have been copied. Make enough copies for groups of four students to work on the letter.

Warm-up Activity (Approximately 10 minutes)

Purpose:

- To create an atmosphere conducive to studying cross-cultural understanding
- To raise students' awareness of their own culture
- To raise students' awareness of different cultures

Materials needed:

- Handouts of the questions in step below for each student in the class

Procedure:

1. Place students in groups. (The ideal group size is three students but you can adjust the group sizes.) Choose two of the questions listed below and ask the students to discuss the questions as they relate to their culture.

- At what age do children move away from home, and why do they leave home?
- Who decides what children do after school (for example sports, clubs, theater, studying, etc.)?
- Do students see their teachers outside of the classroom? For example do teachers sometimes invite students to visit their homes?
- What do students do if they disagree with the teacher?
- Is it acceptable to be late for a meeting with a friend, with a family member, or with a co-worker?
- Do people visit each other's homes unannounced?

- When children pretend to be heroes while playing, who do they want to be?
- Do people talk about the future often, and if so, what do they say about the future?

2. After the students answer these questions, have the groups share their answers briefly. Use the board or a poster to record the responses of the different groups, and point out the similarity and differences of behaviors among the groups. Discuss the extent to which individuals in the group agreed on their answers, and point out the diversity and similarity of behaviors within one culture.

Transition to Activity #1

Explain to students that certain terms characterize dominant patterns of behavior in each culture and that these patterns reflect what each culture values. Tell students that they will read a passage that discusses three of these cultural patterns. Put the terms individualism-collectivism, power distance, and time orientation on the board. Explain to the students that the reading will give examples of these patterns by describing how two different cultures deal with these issues. Tell students that after they do the reading, they will fill out a comprehension chart about the reading.

Activity #1 (Approximately 15 minutes)

Purpose:

- To read and learn about the cultural values of individualism-collectivism, power distance, and time orientation
- To provide students with information about certain cultural values so they can apply this knowledge to practical issues in everyday life

Materials needed:

- Handout of the reading for each student (Appendix B)
- Handout of the comprehension chart for each student (Appendix C)

Procedure:

1. Give students copies of the reading that describes the cultural orientation of two different cultures (Culture Y and Culture X) toward three basic cultural patterns that exist in these cultures: individualism-collectivism, power distance, and time orientation.
2. In pairs, ask students to read individually and then fill out the comprehension chart with their partners.

3. After the students have completed the chart, put two pairs of students together to create groups of four, and ask them to check their answers.

4. Check with each group to make sure that the answers are correct.

Transition to Activity #2

Bring the class together and briefly review the cultural patterns that were described in the reading (individualism, collectivism, low-power distance, high-power distance, future time orientation, and past time orientation). Answer any questions about the cultural patterns. Ask the students if they can think of any situations in which the information that they have learned would be useful. Tell them that in the next activity they will get a chance to be “Cultural Advisors.”

Activity #2 (Approximately 15 minutes)

Purpose:

- To analyze some cross-cultural problem situations

Materials needed:

- Cultural Advisor game cards, on which the letters in Appendix D have been copied. Make enough copies for groups of four students to work on the letters. (Each group receives one of the letters.)

Procedure:

1. Place the students into groups of four. Tell the students that they are going to pretend to be Cultural Advisors for someone who is experiencing a problem with a person from a different culture. Tell the students in groups to read their letters.

2. After they read the letters, ask the groups to try to answer the following questions:

- a. What problem is the writer of the letter experiencing?
- b. Based on the cultural patterns and behavior we have just read about, why is the writer experiencing this problem?
- c. What advice would you give the writer?

3. After each group discusses and resolves the problem, have the group present their answers to the class. Allow students to ask questions about the other groups' answers.

Wrap-up Activity (Approximately 5 minutes)

Purpose:

- To give students the opportunity to reflect on the cultural patterns presented in the lesson

Materials needed

- A notebook for journal writing

Procedures:

1. Ask students to begin a journal entry in which they write a letter to the Cultural Advisor about a problem with a friend from another culture. The problem should be related to the cultural patterns of power distance or time orientation. Tell students to review the information in the reading from Activity # 1 before they write their letters. The letters may be finished out of class.
2. In the next class, plan to discuss the students' letters and the possible answers a Cultural Advisor might give.

Possible Extensions to the Lesson

1. Matching and discussion: Ask students to make up lists of at least five cultural behaviors that are related to cultural values of individualism-collectivism, power distance, and time orientation that were discussed in the lesson. The teacher reviews the student lists and chooses situations to put on index cards (about 3 inches by 5 inches). These cards should briefly describe a behavior (e.g., people do not like to destroy historical things because they consider them extremely valuable to the society). Students form groups of three and take a set of six situation cards. The task of the group is to decide which cultural value from the lesson influences the described pattern of behavior. After group discussions (10 minutes), each group reports on the behavior and matched cultural value to the class. If time permits, groups can exchange sets of cards and play again.
2. Role-play: Create several different problematic cross-cultural situations for pairs of students to act out as a role-play. Student A receives the problem situation and goes to see a Cultural Advisor to talk about this problem and ask for advice. Student B acts as the Cultural Advisor and gives advice about the problem. Then the students can reverse roles. The teacher acts as a facilitator during the role-play rehearsals and answers questions, confirms advice, and so forth. If time permits, several role-plays can be presented to the whole class, followed by a discussion of the issue.
3. Culture Investigator: Have students do a project about their own culture, based on the cultural patterns and value dimensions discussed in the lesson-individualism-collectivism, power distance, and time orientation. The students, individually or in groups, decide (a) how their cultures would be classified for the values presented in the lesson and (b) how these cultural

patterns would be demonstrated in everyday life. The project can be completed as either a writing assignment or as an oral presentation.

4. Cultural Advisor: Ask students to write a letter to the Cultural Advisor in which they ask for advice on a cultural problem that they have experienced. Invite the students to share the letters with you or with a classmate, who will be the Cultural Advisor for the problem. If time permits, share the letters with the class and discuss different perspectives on the cultural problem.

Appendix A Terminology

Behaviors are the way we act based on our learned beliefs and values.

Beliefs are our conviction in the truth of something that we learned by living in our culture; they are the core of our actions and tell us how to behave in the world. Our beliefs are the basis for our values.

A culture is a group of people who share a background because of their common language, knowledge, beliefs, views, values, and behaviors. Culture often results in hidden patterns of communication, viewpoints, and expressions that people in that specific culture share. These hidden patterns have an effect on the way people behave, perceive the world, and interact with others.

A cultural pattern is the collective term to describe a cluster of interrelated cultural orientations. Cultural patterns, are made up of interrelated cultural behaviors which are influenced by values that are shared by a cultural group.

Diversity is the state of being different or of unlikeness (dictionary definition). In the context of society, diversity means differences in various factors that interact to define the society of a particular culture. For example, religions, music, art, dance, foods, educational levels, and economic wealth may be similar for the majority of the people in a homogeneous culture. In a heterogeneous culture, comprising of many ethnic groups, there will be diversity of cultural features.

A dominant culture or cultural pattern is the one that represents the majority or the largest number of people.

A heterogeneous society is one in which members of the society come from diverse cultural groups. Usually there are differences of economic wealth, educational levels, and social status among the groups who live in the society.

A homogeneous society is one in which the majority of the members share the same cultural beliefs, attitudes, and values, and there is little difference in the economic wealth of or social distance between the members of the society.

Knowledge is the facts, skills, and understanding that people of a shared culture have gained through learning and experience.

A stereotype is the belief or opinion held by one group that the majority of a different group can be classified by the actions, appearance, or attitudes of a few members of that group.

Our values are a set of beliefs that are made up of rules for making choices that we have learned. They tell us what is right and wrong, good and bad; they tell us how to live our lives.

A value dimension is a set of interrelated values that exist along a continuum of relative importance. We use this term to describe the values that influence cultural behaviors in all cultures.

Our views are what we have learned from our culture about how to think and believe about certain issues and ideas.

(Definitions are adapted from Samovar, Porter, and Stefani 1997)

Appendix B Reading for Activity #1

Culture X

Culture X values **collectivism**, which means that individuals in that society believe that the groups they belong to are the most important parts of the society. When people make decisions, they consider the groups' goals and wants. In Culture X, people value the groups they belong to more than their own individual selves. People are very loyal to the groups they are part of, and usually people stay at the same job all their lives. In this culture, when people make choices about marriage, education, and work, they always make their decisions together with their families. Their decisions are made based on what their families want them to do.

Culture X believes in **high-power distance**, which means that people who have more power and who have higher positions are treated more formally than other people. In this culture, people are taught that we are not all equal. Some people have more power and authority than others do, and we should treat these people with more respect. In this culture, students do not call their teachers by their names, and teachers and students do not spend time together outside of the classroom.

Culture X is **past oriented**, which means that people stress the importance of history. They believe that the events of the past determined what the society is today. When the society makes decisions, the events of the past should be considered and respected. The people in Culture X do not easily make changes in their culture because they want to hold on to the past.

Culture Y

Culture Y values **individualism**, which encourages people to base their decisions on their personal goals and wants. Culture Y people feel that each individual is special and different from others. People in this culture believe that they are the most important thing in their environment. Culture Y encourages people to do things because they want to do them and to make decisions based only on their wants. If Culture Y people are not happy at their jobs, they are encouraged to look for jobs that will make them happier.

Culture Y also believes in **low-power distance**. This means that the Culture Y people believe all people are equal and should be treated equally regardless of their positions and authority in the society. In Culture Y, supervisors and people in power and their subordinates perceive each other to be the same kind of people. Many students call their teachers by their first names, and many teachers socialize with their students outside of the classroom.

Culture Y society is **future-oriented**, which means that people are very optimistic and excited about the future. In Culture Y, people have discussions about the future and they believe that the future will be better and more prosperous for them than the past.

Appendix C Comprehension chart for the reading in Activity #1

	Culture X	Culture Y
Who should people think about when making decisions about their lives? <i>Which cultural value does this illustrate?</i>		
What is a person most likely to do if he or she is unhappy at a job? <i>Which cultural value does this illustrate?</i>		
Do people treat professors and farmers the same? If not, how does the treatment differ? <i>Which cultural value does this illustrate?</i>		
Do students have coffee with their teachers after class? <i>Which cultural value does this illustrate?</i>		
Do people in this culture like to stress the past, present, or future events of the society? <i>Which cultural value does this illustrate?</i>		

Appendix D Letters for Activity #2

Dear Cultural Advisor,

I have known M for the past year. He is an exchange student at our high school, and we have a lot of fun together. Now it's time for both of us to go to college. I am going to study medicine, because I really want to be a doctor. My father was a little disappointed, because he always wanted me to be a lawyer. But both of my parents are happy for me since I have a definite idea of what I want to do with my future.

I am disappointed for M though. He really likes children and would love to be a teacher, but he will not study to become a teacher. Instead, he will study business and work in his family business in his country. That is what his family has always planned for him. I'm sorry that he is not able to do what he wants to do. I keep encouraging him to become a teacher, but he keeps telling me it's not that simple. We argue all the time over this issue. I just don't understand why he will not tell his family what he really wants to do. Can you please help me?

Confused

Questions to keep in mind:

Where do you think M is from? What cultural pattern is demonstrated? Where do you think Confused is from? What cultural pattern is causing her confusion?

Dear Cultural Advisor,

My boyfriend, J, told me he wants to marry me, and I am very happy because I really love him. Before we start making any plans, he wants me to spend some time with his family. He told me that he needs to know whether his family likes me before we go any further with the wedding plans.

This upset me. If he loves me, why does he care what his family thinks about me? My parents aren't too excited about us getting married because we have only been dating for six months. I told my parents that I love J and it's my decision to marry him. They told me it was okay, as long as he made me happy.

Next week J's family will come to spend time with us so they can get to know me. I am really nervous because I think that if they do not like me, J will not want to marry me.

Can you please help me? Why is J so concerned about his family's opinion of me?

Wondering

Questions to consider:

Where do you think J is from? What cultural pattern is demonstrated here? Where do you think Wondering is from? What cultural pattern is making her so unhappy in this relationship?

Dear Cultural Advisor,

Today my Economics teacher Mr. H invited me and a friend to have a cup of coffee with him at the café after class. He said he wanted to learn more about the economic system in our country and that he really wanted to talk about this. I told him that I could not go because I had already made plans.

To tell you the truth, I feel awkward about this situation, and I think that I upset him when I told him that I could not go. He told me we could meet another time.

I don't understand why he wants to talk to us. We are just students, and I wonder why he didn't invite us to his office for an appointment. This has made me very anxious. What should I do?

Just a Student

Questions to consider:

In what country do you think this took place? Where do you think Just a Student might be from? What cultural patterns are causing this problem?

Dear Cultural Advisor,

I would like to invite my good friend T home with me for spring break, but I'm not sure how my family and T will get along. The problem is that T is very formal with adults-he always uses their last names. He is quiet around people and seems shy, which isn't true because he's a great guy with his friends. T just can't seem to be informal with adults, even people he knows well, like our landlord and his wife. My family, on the other hand, is always joking around and having fun, and my parents and relatives may think that T is unfriendly if he is so formal with them. I want everyone to have a good time, but I'm worried that both T and my family will feel uncomfortable together. What should I do?

Anxious about Spring Break

Questions to consider:

Where do you think each of these students is from? What cultural pattern is in conflict in this situation? Can you think of any way to resolve the problem for Anxious?

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